

PALISADE MESA WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

I. THE STUDY AREA - 99,550 acres

The Palisade Mesa WSA (NV-060-142/162) is located in northeastern Nye County approximately 65 miles east of Tonopah and includes 99,500 acres of BLM lands. The Palisade Mesa WSA lies in the Pancake Range, adjacent to The Wall WSA. Roughly rectangular in shape, the WSA is approximately 18 miles north to south and nine miles east to west. The boundary follows various contour lines southwest from Sandy Summit for about one and a half miles to the fenceline, following the fence to the unnamed dirt road that is the western boundary. The Nyala Wash forms the southern boundary. The southeast corner is formed by a combination of a point to point and a land net line. The eastern and the rest of the northern boundaries generally follow unnamed dirt roads.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE - 66,110 acres recommended for wilderness 33,440 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation of this WSA is to designate 66,110 acres as wilderness and release 33,440 acres for uses other than wilderness. The recommendation for wilderness designation is due to the quality of wilderness values, the lack of man caused disturbances, the lack of competing uses or other resource values, and the area's manageability.

The area recommended for wilderness is in nearly pristine condition. The area's rugged topography has been primarily responsible for the perpetuation of naturalness and also contributes to the scenic quality, especially on the west side where the sheer cliff walls rise up from the valley floor. The view from the top of the mesa looking east is of the unique geologic structures associated with the lunar crater volcanic field. Immediately south of palisade mesa is an area of steep walled canyons carved through solid rock. Numerous small washes and gullies interweave throughout the area. During the infrequent periods of rainfall, the canyons are host to dozens of waterfalls, some as tall as 100 feet. The black beauty mesa rises to the south of the canyons and falls off precipitously into Railroad valley. Huge boulder fields cap the mesas and provide habitat for desert bighorn sheep populations. The area also supports nesting populations of prairie falcons while numerous other raptors can be commonly observed. The area is host to only scattered patches of trees clinging to the sparse soils covering the volcanic rock.

Hiking and camping are difficult because of the terrain and unpredictable sources of water on the mesa. The steep mesa walls are latticed with numerous chimneys, spires, clefts, and boulder fields beckoning climbers of all skill levels. Nature studies are very good due to the undisturbed nature of the area.

Access to any form of ground based vehicle is virtually impossible. The low potential for energy and mineral development and the absence of private inholdings means that the area would be highly manageable. Further enhancing its manageability of the area: steep, rugged, cliffs abruptly rising from the surrounding valley floors would cause the area to be largely self-protecting.

The 33,440 acres recommended for uses other than wilderness have a higher potential for mineral and energy exploration and development and low wilderness values. Manageability of these areas would be more difficult due to the open, easily accessible nature of the area where control of off-road vehicle travel would require more frequent patrolling.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: Within the 66,110 acres recommended for wilderness, the area is predominantly natural.

When in the core of the WSA, the forces of nature dominate the senses. The herds of desert bighorn sheep, raptors soaring on warm air rising against the fortress-like walls, and the prehistoric sense of volcanic craters, cinder cones, and lava flows all join to intensify the feeling of naturalness and antiquity of the backcountry. The only evidence of man's work is evident along the boundaries of the WSA. Within the core of the WSA there are none.

Several two track ways extend into the WSA from the eastern border and the toe of the northern mesa wall contains two spring developments.

B. Opportunities for Solitude: The majority of the WSA is composed of rocky, sheer-sided mesas. Changes in elevation are abrupt, creating a varied and interesting topography. Canyons into the mesas are deep and rugged shielding the visitor from virtually all. Although the terrain on top of the mesas is rather flat and rolling, innumerable drainages and gullies throughout the area combined with enormous boulder fields screen much of the area. The height of the mesas also work to the advantage of providing solitude from whatever activities may be occurring in the valley bottoms. The limited and unpredictable sources of water on the mesas help to disperse recreation so as to promote separation amongst users.

The flat valley portions along the west and south contain little topographic variation, with relief limited to shallow gullies. These areas provide little solitude from surrounding activities.

Secluded spots are primarily a product of excellent topographical variation and occur throughout the WSA.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation are available within the WSA. The area is superb for hiking, backpacking, hunting, horseback riding, mountain and rock climbing, photography, bird watching, and sightseeing.

Vertical cliffs along the mesas provide some challenge to a hiker, but the effort to reach the mesa is rewarded by close encounters with desert bighorn sheep and raptors on the wind. Hiking in one of the many secluded canyon dissecting the WSA provides the visitor with challenging adventure rewarded by the thought that many of the steep, rocky draws may never had been visited before. The unit is large enough to accommodate an extended backpacking trip, although lack of predictable water will test the backcountry savvy of those desiring to spend a star night on the mesa top.

Rock climbing opportunities abound along the precipitous cliffs of the mesa. Several areas along the north mesa walls provide opportunity for multi-pitch technical climbs.

Landforms are stark and eye catching. Sculptured rock formations, interesting vistas, and rocky canyons all add to the scenic values and provide excellent subjects for photography. Lunar Crater, a maar volcano listed on the National Natural Landmark Register, is located within this WSA. Basalt, multi-colored obsidian, volcanic cinders and other rocks of volcanic origin are ever present in the WSA and provide for enticing contrasting in color and form with the surrounding mesa walls.

D. Special Features: The WSA is unique in its primeval character. The area is covered with many unusual land forms relating to its volcanic heritage. Lunar Crater, an enormous hole in the earth 3,800 feet in diameter and almost 450 feet deep, formed when hot volcanic gases exploded. Numerous cinder cones dominate the valley forms. The area is less acceptable to livestock which frequent the valley floors adjoining the WSA. The result is vegetation in nearly pristine condition.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The Palisade Mesa wilderness is manageable as wilderness. Manageability is enhanced by the lack of private or State inholdings within the WSA, steep, rugged walls of volcanic rock abruptly rising from the surrounding

valleys; cause the area to be largely self-protecting. The exception to this would be along the southeastern boundary where the land rises more gently from the adjoining hills.

Management of the areas not recommended for wilderness would also be possible although more patrols would be necessary. Several cherrystemmed routes exist in these areas.

The portion of the Palisade Mesa WSA not recommended for wilderness designation contains 30 oil and gas leases covering approximately 38,400 acres and one mining claim.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The Bureau of Mines and the U.S. Geological Survey performed a mineral investigation for the 66,110 acres of the Palisade Mesa WSA recommended as suitable for wilderness designation concluding: There has been no mining activity in or within two miles of the wilderness study area. No mining claims are present. No metallic mineral resources were identified, however, antimony, copper, gold, lead, silver, and zinc were mined within 15 miles of the study areas but from different geologic environments.

No drilling or oil and gas exploration is known to have occurred in the wilderness study area. Oil and gas resources are unlikely. Geothermal resources exist along major basin and range faults in Railroad Valley, but are not known to occur within the wilderness study area.

The 33,440 acres not recommended for wilderness designation has a high potential for mineral and energy exploration and development. The mineral and energy resource values include 4,160 acres rated good for the potential occurrence of base, ferrous, and precious metals and 7,360 acres rated good for the potential occurrence of oil and gas.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

During the inventory phase, nine comments specifically addressing this WSA were received. Three comments supported wilderness designation and six others supported nonwilderness designation. During formal public review of the draft EIS, a total of 16 comments on the Palisade Mesa WSA were received. Nine individuals supported wilderness designation and three individuals, one mining company, and one mining organization recommended nonwilderness designation. Those supporting wilderness designation commented on the outstanding naturalness of the area, the accessibility of the area, the unusual slickrock and rock outcrops which form park like breaks, the diversity of wildlife and plant life, that this is the Southwest's prime rapture area for rare predatory birds, it includes the Lunar Crater National Natural Landmark and Nevada Natural Heritage Landmark, it is a wonderland of smooth and polished rocks in huge slabs. Two comments supported combining the Palisade Mesa WSA with The Wall WSA. Those opposing wilderness designation commented on the enormous mineral and energy potential of the area and if roads must be closed to make a WSA manageable, it should not be wilderness.

Two State agencies commented in favor of wilderness designation. The Nevada Division of State Parks confirmed the BLM analysis. The State, during its consistency review, concurred with the Preferred Alternative.